# Chapter One

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.” ~ Charles Darwin

I open the door to find a body at my feet. The rich smell of blood causes my canines to lengthen. Reaching out in the darkness, I flip on the wall switches. Light comes on across the room, illuminating the dead guy lying face down in front of me. The whole scene makes me wish I’d stayed in bed today, curled up next to my warm husband.

“Crap, look at the rug.”

Okay, out loud that sounds rather dispassionate. Whoever this poor stiff is, he’s dead. I’m the one left with a huge mess on my hands and guests arriving within the hour. Good thing I caught this before one of the maids did. Their screams from the last time were a devil to calm down.

Expanding my awareness, I connect with my husband in a soft electrical tingle of sensation. Rafe? There’s a dead guy in suite six. We’ve got to move fast before the next group arrives.

Rafe’s rugged face appears in my head. My extended consciousness lets me see the room around him as well as hear his thoughts. He’s leaning against the sink in our private kitchen, wearing a robe, a steaming mug of coffee in his hand.

Does it look like an accidental overfeeding? His mental voice sounds incredulous. We haven’t had one of those in years.

No, there’s way too much blood. Can you come up here and help me?

Sure, Dria. I’m fresh out of the shower—give me a couple minutes.

I step over the body and into the room, closing the door behind me with a soft snick of the catch. I’d rather not have the guests get a whiff of this mess. Some of them would probably think we did it on purpose for “ambience.” But others might not.

Walking to the bench at the end of the bed, I sit and look around the suite. Nothing looks amiss with the king-size bed, gleaming dark furniture, and lush brocade fabrics. I turn my attention again to the body. The stark white face turned toward me doesn’t look familiar. I’m positive he isn’t a mate of one of the vampire masters staying at the inn; I make it a point to meet all of them on arrival.

Examining his brown hair and twenty-something face, I don’t recognize him as a vampire servant either. Not many have come to stay with the current crop of undead we’ve got right now. Who else?

The spilled blood staining the carpet arouses my basic vampire needs while confusing my train of thought. I think back to my peaceful morning yoga, trying to clear my head. Think, dammit, think!

Could he be a companion? A lot of masters bring “food” with them. Being a full-service hotel we can provide all the needs of our guests, but some still insist on BYOB.

His striped, button-down shirt and ragged jeans rule him out as an employee. Unless he’s an off-duty new hire I’m unaware of.

Rafe, have we hired anyone new?

Not in at least a month. You’ve met everyone. My husband hesitates for a moment. Send me his face and I’ll let you know if he looks familiar.

I concentrate to project the image from my mind to Rafe’s. My strong ability enables me to share the entire experience with him if I wish. I could send the metallic smell filling the air, the sticky congealing blood pooled about the victim’s head, or the dark essence of death that lingers after a vicious kill—but choose to limit it only to the image of the victim’s face.

No, I don’t recognize him either, Rafe confirms. Damn, Tommy’s flagging me down. I’ll be up as soon as I can.

Hurry, please. We’ve got guests coming, I glance down at my ever-present watch, in forty-five minutes!

Rafe ignores me. Typical. He’ll get here when he gets here. My muscles tense while I fight the urge to pace. Who could’ve killed this poor guy? And why? Why here for that matter? I’ve seen my share of corpses in my long undead life, but in the twenty years we’ve run this inn, there hasn’t been a single murder.

Okay, okay… let’s see. What should I do? I try to center my thoughts by taking a deep breath. Rich, aromatic blood rushes into my nostrils. That was a mistake. It smells so damn good. Fidgeting in my seat, I feel desperate to do something to distract myself from my desires.

We can’t call the police in this isolated area of Alaska. Not only would they take hours to arrive, but they wouldn’t be able to help. I don’t even want to think of the memory altering I’d have to do if they did show up. Instead, I can be the one to take notes and catalog evidence. That seems to work well on the detective shows.

I pat down my hips, realizing too late the black clingy dress I’m wearing doesn’t have pockets. Where the hell is my notebook? I need it to write this stuff down.

Rafe! Are you coming?

No. Not yet, my dear. A masculine chuckle reaches my mind. I’m heading up the stairs now.

The hotel resembles a large T-shape, with the lobby being dead center where all the wings converge. Not wanting to send him back downstairs, I think about what lies between there and here.

 I need a notebook and a pen to write down all the facts. Can you get them for me?

I think we need to cut back on the TV, Dria.

 I hear the smile in his words. He read my mind and knows what I plan to do. Jerk. That man loves to pull my chain and live on the edge.

 Relax, liebling, we’ll handle this.

Easy for you to say. You’re not a vampire sitting next to, I glance over at the large red stain around the victim’s head, what looks like three or four quarts of blood. Rafe’s my human husband. The mate bond ritual we shared sixty-five years ago, combined with our frequent mutual blood exchange, keeps him from aging.

I hear Rafe hesitate on the wide, curving staircase leading up to the second floor.

You’ll find pen and paper in the hall table, top drawer, outside suite seven.

You want to show me too, while you’re at it?

I don’t need to see his smile to confirm he’s laughing at me.

I focus my will and gather an image in my mind, picturing the last time I fed from my spouse. The delicious smell of his sweaty skin fills my thoughts. The clean and musky memory triggers heat low in my middle. It spreads at the mere reminder of the salty taste of piercing his flesh to drink. I feel the rush of his life-giving elixir fill my mouth and tease my taste buds with its power. I push the feelings, sensations, and pictures out to his mind as he enters the suite.

Rafe stops the motion of the door before it hits the body. He staggers forward a bit as my mental projection slams into his mind. He’s holding the notebook and pen in one hand while gripping the doorknob with the other.

“Whew! All right already, I get the picture!”

I smile and pull the illusion away. Rafe closes the door and joins me on the other side of the corpse. I think I made my point. I may not need much blood anymore, but he certainly enjoys the little bit I ingest when we make love.

He tosses the notebook, aiming straight for my head. Apparently, I struck a nerve with my teasing.

 I jot down the basics I’ve got for the dead guy–his age, race, brown hair, and what he’s wearing. Rafe squats near him. His gray dress slacks pull across his apple-cheeked ass and I once again lose my focus.

 “Unlucky stiff,” Rafe comments. “What do you know so far?”

He looks back over his shoulder and smiles at me. My eyes are drawn up to his sparkling blue ones.

Crap. What did he say? I scramble around for an answer.

“Umm…” Good God, I’ve got to get the hell away from all this blood, and soon. “I came in to do a last-minute check of the rooms before the MacKellan group arrives. Found him dead by the door, just like you see him now.”

“As far as wounds go, all I see is this big dent in the back of his head.” He holds his fist out to the wound. “Looks like it could have been something this size. Think he has another injury under him?” Putting words to action, Rafe places a hand under the corpse’s hip and shoulder, lifting him to look. “Nothing in his chest.” He lowers the body to the carpet.

“You’re sure you don’t recognize him, right?” I ask.

“Nah. I’d have recognized that scar.” Rafe points out the small crescent-shaped mark on his left cheek, and I jot the observation in my notebook. “Did you see his shoes?” Rafe nods in the direction of his feet. “He wouldn’t be walking around in those loafers outside for long. The winter temps here would freeze his toes off in minutes.” He looks up at me, a frown creasing his forehead. “He’s fully human, right?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” I lean down to draw in a deep sniff of air from near the body. Subtle undertones of the victim’s personal scent seep into my brain. The pure, clean essence of his human blood overpowers everything else when I look for it. “He carries no blood marker from another vampire. Which means he is not a servant or a mate. He could be a companion who arrived late, someone we’re unaware of.”

“Good point.” Rafe stands. “Who do we still have here after yesterday’s departures?”

“Hmm, let’s see…” I step back from the body. “The Natsuhara group out in cabin two—Jet has his mate and one companion with him. There’s the loner in cabin five, Drew Lipshultz. Here in the main building, we’ve still got Salvador’s group, a party of eight. They’re in the west wing. I don’t know why any of them would have a reason to be here in the north wing though.”

“This door was locked, right?”

I wave my handy master key card. “Yup.”

Rafe pats the dead guy’s pockets. “He’s warm. Can’t have been dead too long.”

“No, you’re right. The maids were here this morning. I’m sure we would have heard their screaming if he was here then.”

“Hey, got a wallet.” Rafe holds up a tattered bi-fold. “Looks like there’s no ID. But I do see a credit card.” He takes it out, angling to read it. “John Pierre Vaughn. Ring a bell with you?”

“No. Don’t know it.” I glance around at the red mess. “This rug looks shot.”

Rafe ignores me. “What could he have been doing here? How did he get in?”

“Well, his stuff has got to be somewhere.” Scanning the room, I add, “I don’t see a coat or his bag.” I check the closet and the bath, shaking my head as I return. “Nope, nothing in there either.”

“Are you thinking the killer could be human?” Rafe stands, facing me.

“My first guess would be a human. Most vamps wouldn’t waste this much blood. Even though a newly turned fledgling only needs a pint a day, a vampire can drain a body if they want to.”

He smiles and leans forward, kissing me lightly on the mouth. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

“Ha! Like that would stop you.”

Rafe steps close, lifting a hand to run through my long copper hair. “You okay? You don’t seem yourself.”

“I’ll be good once we get rid of this body. I cannot freakin’ believe we’ve got this to contend with right now.” I sound a bit whiny, even to my own ears.

“It’ll come together. We’ll work it all out.” His calm sureness in life is always a wondrous thing to experience. “After all, we’re on 10,000 acres in the middle of nowhere. It’s pitch dark twenty hours a day and we control the only airstrip for miles around. Where is the killer going to go?”

He’s right. But the practical side of me keeps seeing one thing: we have a dead guy, cooling fast, in our hotel room.

“You know something, hon?”

“What?” He sounds distracted.

“Trying to figure this out isn’t fun anymore and we’ve got people arriving,” I cut my eyes down again to my watch, “thirty minutes. I can switch the MacKellans down one room, but we’ve got to move pronto. This guy’s going to stink and we need to make a good impression on the new arrivals.”

Pressure builds in my chest.

Rafe takes out a utility knife from the back of his slacks. I swear he would have made a great Boy Scout. He’s always so damn prepared.

He slides up the blade and motions to the corpse. “Are we agreed? I cut the carpet and roll him inside?” He notices my gimlet stare. “Hey, I’m only asking because I don’t want you getting pissy with me if I cut the carpet without checking.”

Pissy is a nice way to say bitchy, but I’m okay with it.

“No, you’re right. It’s ruined. Put him in one of the sheds outside, lock it up and we’ll talk again later about what to do.” The body will freeze solid out there in a few hours, and no one will smell him.

About two feet from the stain, he cuts a big rectangle into the carpet and padding. Quick and sure, his movements accentuate a natural grace, one that flips all my switches.

A familiar wetness gathers in my panties while watching the muscles in his back work under his tight blue polo. The blood in the room arouses the predator in me, and due to my advanced age, it’s not blood I crave but sex. I remind myself, again, to stop breathing.

If I’m not careful to keep my thoughts tightly bound, Rafe will see the erotic image running through my mind of his bare shoulders between my thighs. I experience an all-over body shiver trying to pull myself together.

He looks up with a small smile on his face. Damn it, he saw.

“You’re a bad girl, you know that?”

“And you love it,” I reply.

He rolls the body in the carpet and hefts it over his shoulder in one smooth move. My gaze drops to his chest. Yum… his shirt shows off his definition nicely. My tongue snakes out to wet my lips. Good God, is it hot in here or is it me?

“Yeah, I do. I’ll deal with you later.” He winks. “Save your sexiness for the customers. They feed off you when you do. You exude sex.”

Our inn is renowned for bringing hidden fantasies to the surface. It’s one of the big reasons clients come back again and again. That and the fantastic sex they have when they’re here as a result.

I stick my lip out in a pout. “Fine, but dead body or no dead body, I want you later. Better not tire yourself out… I have plans.”

He chuckles as he walks out the door. I’m sure you do, Dria, I’m sure you do.

Once he leaves, and takes the main source of blood with him, I take a deep cleansing lungful of air.

Smoothing the fabric of the dress over my stomach and hips, I decide I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. I leave, re-locking the door behind me. Glancing at my wrist, I note it’s twenty-two minutes until the new group arrives. Then it’s show time!